

Introduction: Jazz narratives and sonic icons



Figure 1 Still from *Collateral*, 2004

MAX: I never learned to listen to jazz.

VINCENT: It's off melody. Behind the notes. Not what's expected – improvising, like tonight.

MAX: Like tonight?

VINCENT: Most people, ten years from now, same job, same place, same routine. Everything the same. Just keeping it safe over and over and over. Ten years from now. Man, you don't know where you'll be ten minutes from now. Do you?

[Vincent talks to the jazz club waitress and invites trumpeter Daniel over for a drink after his set. A short musical shot of musicians on stage cuts to Vincent, Max and Daniel sitting at the table following the set.]

DANIEL: No, now see, I was about nineteen, bussing tables right here. The money wasn't shit, but that wasn't the point. It was about being around the music. And I was. I mean, take this one night. July 22nd, 1964. Who do you think walks through that door? Miles Davis. That's right.

VINCENT: In the flesh?

DANIEL: That's right. I'm talking about, through those doors, the coolest man on the planet.

VINCENT: Jesus.

DANIEL: Anyway, he had been at a recording session up at Columbia, up on Vine. So Miles comes through that door. Before you know it, he's up on the bandstand, jamming with the band.

VINCENT: I mean it had to be ...

DANIEL: Oh it was scary. I mean, the dude was so focused, man. Plus, he was a kind of scary cat anyway, man. I mean, everybody and their mama knew that you don't just come up and talk to Miles Davis. I mean, he may have looked like he was chilling, but he was absorbed. This one young, hip couple, one of them tried to shake his hand one day. And the guy says, 'Hi, my name is ...'. Miles said, 'Get the fuck out of my face, you jive motherfucker. Take your silly bitch with you.' [Laughter] You know? That's ... that was Miles, man. That's the way he was when he was in his musical headspace. Fierce.

VINCENT: But did you talk to him?

DANIEL: Better than that.

VINCENT: No.

DANIEL: I played for about twenty minutes.

VINCENT: Unbelievable.

MAX: How'd you do?

DANIEL: How'd I do? Well you really ain't shit when you're playing next to Miles Davis. But he carried my ass.

VINCENT: What'd he say?

DANIEL: He said one word, 'Cool'.

VINCENT: 'Cool'?

DANIEL: Yeah.

VINCENT: That's it?

DANIEL: Yeah. That meant, 'Good, but not ready.' It meant, 'Look me up when you are.'<sup>1</sup>

Michael Mann's 2004 film *Collateral* might seem an unlikely place to begin a book about jazz icons. And yet, although jazz only features in one scene within the entire film, the dialogue referring to the iconic jazz musician Miles Davis touches on several themes that form a central part of this study. *Collateral* is a relatively straightforward action thriller starring Tom Cruise as Vincent, a contract killer who embarks on a series of hits during one long night in Los Angeles. Hijacking taxi driver Max (Jamie Foxx) and his cab, Vincent forces Max to take him from one job to the next with their situation becoming more intense and out of control as the narrative unfolds. Vincent's third hit takes place within a jazz club where, unknown to Max, Vincent's target is the black club owner and trumpet virtuoso Daniel. The opening segment of the 'Jazzman' scene, above, is largely used to explore the relationship between Vincent and Max, Vincent being the cold, calculating, dangerous and 'improvising' killer, and Max being the safe, mundane and predictable taxi driver. Only when the gig is finished and the club is empty does it become apparent that jazzman Daniel is the next target on Vincent's hit list. Vincent, obviously an obsessive jazz fan given his insights into, and appreciation of, the music, is troubled by the prospect of killing the jazzman and so provides Daniel with the opportunity to evade execution simply by answering a jazz question correctly. At the climax of the scene, Vincent follows Daniel's anecdote about Miles Davis with the simple question 'Where did Miles learn music?' Daniel replies that he knows everything there is to know about Miles Davis, and there is a confidence in the jazzman that suggests he will walk free. And yet, when the reply comes that Miles learned music at Juilliard, Vincent immediately shoots Daniel in the head and whispers into the ear of his dead victim 'Dropped out of Juilliard after less than a year. Tracked down Charlie Parker on 52nd Street, who mentored him for the next three years.' Although fulfilling his contract, Vincent looks visibly shaken by his actions and, within the context of the film at large, the killing of the jazzman triggers the contract killer's gradual loss of control and the start of his demise.

This scene is typical of many media representations of jazz, from the sense of hysteria and otherness that surrounds the presentation of the jazz life to the hyperbolic masculine rhetoric of jazz artists; from the

romanticised perception that improvisation is dangerous and on the edge to the ultimate destruction of the black jazz artist – essentially, you get the feeling that if Vincent doesn't kill Daniel the music somehow will. I suggest that, whilst these seemingly inconsequential mediations of jazz can be considered overblown, they not only reflect and perpetuate more broad-based jazz mythologies that infiltrate jazz discourse at every level, they also shed light on the signifying potential of the music and its ever-changing cultural status. Although the 'Jazzman' scene itself is less than three minutes in duration, a number of jazz tropes, representations and mythologies are played out in the narrative sequence that both inform, and are informed by, mainstream jazz discourse. Daniel's jazz club is stereotypical; it is an after-hours venue for a select few who 'get it', and the dialogue refers to jazz's dwindling audiences, reinforcing the impression that this music is art music and not to be consumed or enjoyed by the masses. Vincent is clearly an obsessive personality and it is through this obsession and devotion to the music that he has developed a passion and understanding of the music. Like Norman Mailer's problematic description of the 'white negro' who lives the jazz life, the scene presents Vincent as a non-conformist psychopath who is governed by his own rules.<sup>2</sup> Vincent's obsession and identification with the unpredictable, dangerous and improvised world of jazz becomes a model for the way in which he lives his life, as the opening dialogue with Max suggests. Crucially, the way in which jazz legend Miles Davis enters into the film narrative demonstrates his status as icon, moving between the fictional world of the film and the reality of the musician as the 'coolest man on the planet'. In effect, as an icon, Davis retains an other-worldly quality that takes him out of his historical context and invests him with symbolic meaning; he has become a trope for the romantic jazz life. The scene also uses the persona and biography of Davis to perpetuate several mythologies of jazz, from the portrayal of Davis as detached from his social environment ('the dude was so focused', 'in his musical headspace', 'you don't just come up and talk to Miles Davis'), conveying meaning through inference and non-verbal gesture ('That meant "Good, but not ready."'), to the fundamental assertion that true educational value can only occur on the street or bandstand. Indeed, jazzman Daniel's ultimate downfall is triggered by his suggestion that the Juilliard School was the place where Miles learned music. Daniel's failure to recognise the fact that formal education is not conducive to living the jazz life is suggestive of his own lack of abilities as a jazz artist; it is perhaps this lack of insight that contributes to his never being ready to share the stage with Davis and, therefore, he is ultimately expendable.

Film representations such as these serve to bring the broad-based mythologies of jazz to life; Davis's presence within the *Collateral* scene is all-pervasive, and anecdotal accounts of his iconic aura are a central narrative device. Moving beyond the fictional world of the film, Davis's biography is used as a means to enhance jazz myths. Krin Gabbard has discussed the use of Miles Davis's music in film to invest white characters with sex appeal and a degree of romantic depth.<sup>3</sup> Whilst the 'Jazzman' scene does not rob black performers of their achievements – Davis is treated with almost god-like reverence – the scene does perpetuate the Hollywood treatment of African American musicians. Daniel is perceived both as 'Other' and ultimately on a path to destruction, for within a Hollywood jazz-film context, African American musicians cannot reconcile life and music.<sup>4</sup>

Musically the 'Jazzman' scene is also interesting, as Miles Davis's 'Spanish Key' is heard within the film's diegesis as the music played in the club from the beginning of the scene. The choice of 'Spanish Key' is significant, as the recording is not instantly recognisable to a general audience and, although deriving from one of Davis's most commercially successful albums, *Bitches Brew*, it is not a track associated with the classic Davis sound of the 1950s to mid 1960s. From this perspective, the music not only provides the jazz club with a contemporary, electric feel, it is also symbolic as music that does not sit comfortably within the homogeneous constructed jazz tradition. Within the scene, Davis's recorded music is presented as live jazz and is embodied through the characters on screen. We are encouraged to believe that the sounds being heard emanate from Daniel on stage and, in this respect, Davis's music functions as an intertextual reference for what is to follow. Like Daniel's failure to understand the notion that jazz is learned on the street, his performance of 'Spanish Key' is also something that places him on the outside of the iconic jazz mainstream. If we assume that the sounds coming from Daniel's trumpet are improvised, and not a faithful re-enactment of Davis's music, the musical style (electric jazz/rock) lies outside the canon of masterworks created before 1970. If, instead, Daniel's performance was of Miles Davis's 'So What' from the *Kind of Blue* album, it would be instantly recognisable as an iconic recording. This would not only destroy the sense that the music was coming from Daniel's trumpet but would also signify the trumpeter as a musical genius; arguably, his association with a canonical recording might also make him less expendable.

This short scene echoes a number of key themes I explore throughout *Jazz Icons*, from the promotion of the other-worldly qualities of iconic figures to the way in which the disembodied sounds of jazz greats influence

everyday jazz practice, from the use of anecdotes in communicating the story of jazz to the assertion that formal education is the antithesis of authentic jazz practice. I suggest that jazz icons occupy a complex place within contemporary culture that is evidenced through film and media representations such as this, and I have therefore adopted a multifaceted approach to understanding icons. When referring to icons, I use the word with all of its dominant definitions in mind and suggest that it is this conflation of meanings that makes jazz discourse particularly interesting and unique. Whereas conventional discussions of iconic jazz stars revolve around visual imagery, my work seeks to develop the study of icons to include the ways in which they have become symbols for the jazz life and reflect the values of the neo-traditionalist mainstream. When discussing jazz icons, then, I incorporate the following five definitions of the word into my critical methodology.

### Icon as visual image

The definition of icon as a visual image has dominated discussions of jazz musicians to date. Although still relatively limited in terms of scholarly perspectives and theoretical discussion, visual representations of jazz have played a central role in constructing an aesthetic for jazz, helping to frame the way the music is perceived and understood.<sup>5</sup> When considering the significance of the visual aspects of jazz as iconic art, it is perhaps no coincidence that the bebop era – widely associated with jazz’s transition to serious art music – coincided with the creation of probably the most famous jazz label to date, Blue Note Records. Blue Note was established in 1939 and grew into a label that would have a significant impact on the promotion of jazz as both sonic and visual art for decades to come. From the mid 1950s on, Blue Note Records began to define jazz as quintessentially hip, acknowledging the merits of jazz as a way of life and more than just a sonic experience. Using the photography of Francis Wolff and cover art of designers such as Reid Miles, Blue Note began to develop an artistic aesthetic that would have a profound impact on the representation of jazz for decades to come. In turning album covers into works of art, Blue Note integrated iconic monochrome photography with style guidelines quite often seen within European art movements. For example, many iconic Blue Note albums bear a striking resemblance to modernist movements and pay homage to artists working within very different artistic contexts.<sup>6</sup> We can understand these cultural ‘borrowings’

as indicative of an attempt to establish a distinct experimental art aesthetic for jazz. Indeed, the success of Blue Note arguably emanated from a synergy between good music and visual representation. Furthermore, the production of liner notes helped to create the jazz life in literary form, supporting the idea of jazz existing beyond the music. Within this context, Krin Gabbard has discussed the way in which novelists, film-makers and photographers tend on the one hand to contribute to the continuation of certain mythologies bound up with the music and yet, on the other hand, have the potential to bring new life to the music, providing a new dimension to the sounds that we hear and a way into music that some might find difficult to comprehend at first.<sup>7</sup> Visual representations have the power both to liberate jazz and to infuse the music with new qualities but, at the same time, they can also perpetuate stereotypes of jazz and the lives that musicians lead. The visual representation of jazz, therefore, enables us to make connections with the music and feel closer to its associated figures but, paradoxically, it also plays a central role in turning musicians into icons, arguably severing connections with, and distancing artists from, the everyday world. In the same way that Jed Rasula discusses the 'seductive menace' of recordings in jazz history, I argue that the same can be said of jazz photography.<sup>8</sup> For example, photographers not only helped to document the history of the music but also helped to construct the media representation of jazz itself, using monochrome techniques (even when colour was available) to depict and represent jazz as art. Photographers not only document what they are witnessing, they also frame the subject in such a way that their images form part of a connotative system; jazz photography can engender feelings in us and come to stand for a multitude of cultural values. Even photographs that have a documentary purpose can be seen as framing the music in some way or encouraging a particular reading. For example, monochrome photography helps to place jazz very much in the past and also takes it out of the ordinary, creating an environment for the music that is different from our everyday world. Ironically, the monochrome world depicted in jazz photography is far from dull; there is something about this medium that pulls the viewer in and gives a richness and vibrancy to the scene that colour photography cannot. The photographic quality makes a scene look more real whilst signifying honesty, nostalgia and sentimentality, the perfect antidote to the modern day world.<sup>9</sup> From a professional perspective, monochrome has also become synonymous with art photography and therefore encourages the reader to take the image seriously. Visual representation is an integral part of our initial



connection to any figures of history, as a means of identification and recognition; it enables us to perceive artists as real, rather than mythic. Paradoxically, visual representation is essential in the construction of iconic jazz musicians, the images themselves making a significant contribution to artists becoming iconic in the first place, moving them from the real to the hyper-real.

### Icon as symbol

Understanding the role of mediation in creating, sustaining and altering the symbolic power of icons is a central theme in this book and I explore underlying issues through the examination of different mediated 'texts', including the recording, language, image and myth. In a wider context, I argue that jazz icons have come to stand for a whole host of values beyond their visual representation. In effect, icons carry out a symbolic function in that they are continually invested with meaning and serve both to support and perpetuate jazz mythologies. Within several chapters of this book, I argue that jazz icons have taken on a symbolic quality in serving to support the authority of the jazz canon, a sense of homogenous tradition and the romantic jazz life. In addition to the canon being significant in promoting the pantheon of jazz greats, iconic representations can be viewed as part of a broader cultural sea-change in which celebrity fulfils an important role in constructing identities and reinforcing societal values. Although the growing influence of jazz icons can be viewed as part of the increasing importance of celebrity and mediated personae, their function within the constructed jazz mainstream is to appear as separate and resistant to the influence of the modern world. When jazz icons represent the values of the jazz tradition, they are presented as the antithesis of modern-day celebrity in that they purportedly preserve aesthetic values in an age of cultural and moral decline. Although this neo-traditionalist agenda is riddled with nostalgia for a bygone age, the promotion of the icon and his music as natural and unmediated remains a popular (mis-)conception. In a jazz context, then, musical greats are treated as different from celebrities; our sense of them as mediated personae is lost, and in perceiving them as symbolic icons we are encouraged to believe that they are charismatic and heroic, superhuman stars endowed with natural talent and other-worldly qualities.<sup>10</sup> Jazz is effectively promoted as an unmediated experience in which there is no differentiation between the star on stage and the living person backstage. Essentially, the



jazz greats' fame is widely understood as a consequence of their innate ability or musical genius and not as mediated personae per se. This belief paves the way for jazz icons to be romantically perceived as at one with their instruments, leading inseparable lives from the music they perform and transcending everyday experience through improvised performance.

I would argue (as others have done within more broad-based studies of stars and celebrities), however, that it is precisely the mediated personae of icons that afford them a symbolic role, making artists seem overly charismatic and other-worldly. On a fairly straightforward level, the impact of mediation can be seen when fans get to meet a living legend in person and are either dumbstruck at coming face to face with their hero or disappointed by the normality of their experience. Moreover, consider how the perception of jazz greats would change if we didn't have access to mediating artefacts: sound recordings, monochrome photography, cinematic depictions of jazz artists, biographical accounts of musicians, a sense of homogenous tradition where one great artist influences another, literary explorations of the music, 'first hand' accounts of jazz greats and related anecdotes, and so on. Essentially, icons would cease to be iconic, jazz greats would be considered part of the everyday world and, arguably, jazz would no longer be jazz. Therefore, for jazz to be considered jazz, mediation has to occur, from the distribution of jazz 'texts' to the conveyance of meaning and a sense of the iconic. As Jessica Evans and David Hesmondalgh suggest, historically, every artist or personality that has found fame and notoriety has relied on some form of media management in order to gain acknowledgement from an audience, and it is therefore questionable to separate heroic acts (art) from forms of public expression (media).<sup>11</sup>

### Icon as uncritical object of devotion

'Musicians, critics and other listeners may disagree on many points, but where the music of John Coltrane is concerned there is never any argument. He was, simply, a giant.'<sup>12</sup> It is understandable that a canon of art requires the support of a pantheon of gods, and the greater emphasis placed on jazz as a canonical art form suggests that icons will continue to develop a central symbolic role in jazz discourse. Over recent years, jazz greats have increasingly been promoted and understood as separate from the everyday world and, partly because of the impact of the canon and its supporting pantheon of legendary figures, icons are now largely treated as objects of uncritical devotion. At several points within this study, I discuss the way in which

iconic figures are treated in uncomplicated terms, so that the frictions, contradictions and problematic aspects of their lives and music are ironed out into one straightforward homogeneous narrative. In addition to discussing the consequences of canonising jazz, Gabbard has also commented on the growing wave of jazz texts devoted to treating jazz icons in uncritical terms. Indeed, he argues that there are two dominant narratives used in film to represent African American jazz musicians; the first is linked to the hysterical, sexually charged and tragic nature of Hollywood biopics, and the second is a more recent type of romanticised story that borders on hagiography.<sup>13</sup> Although Gabbard talks specifically about film, I argue that these dominant narratives can be applied to a wider jazz context and are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the combination of the tragedy, masculine sexuality and hagiography summarises the representation of several jazz texts at present. As the 'Jazzman' scene from *Collateral* demonstrates, jazz can now signify a combination of sex, violence, aesthetic beauty and improvised hysteria at the same time as treating iconic musicians as saintly. Within this cinematic context, Miles Davis can obviously do no wrong; he is an object of uncritical devotion even to the extent that his antisocial behaviour ('Get the fuck out of my face, you jive motherfucker ...') is considered cool and alluring.

### Icon as deity

Treating jazz greats as objects of devotion beyond criticism is only one step removed from perceiving icons as religious entities. The other-worldly and symbolic qualities of iconic jazz stars have led to a position where they perform a god-like role in certain contexts. Within this book, I examine how jazz icons have taken on a godly significance and are represented in such a way that they demand unqualified adoration and respect, bordering on a type of sacred worship and religious observance for musicians and fans alike. Jazz icons have an all-pervasive presence within mainstream jazz discourse; their influence has a more prominent place in the narrativisation of jazz as the years go by. In this way, they influence jazz practice at every level, from the way in which musicians religiously transcribe, imitate and develop techniques to sound like their jazz heroes to the role that ritual and sacrifice play in the promotion of the jazz life. Once deceased, jazz greats can be transformed into icons, and their lifestyles and the circumstances of their deaths become the subject of morbid enquiry and mythical interpretation; one only needs